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SUBJECT: CODEL MCCONNELL

1. (U) SUMMARY: Senators McConnell, Chambliss, Risch, and Barrasso all urged Afghan political leaders to hold a free, fair, and transparent election this summer. Their meetings with President Karzai, Minister of Interior Atmar, and several potential presidential candidates received widespread media coverage in Afghanistan, particularly McConnell's statements about transparent elections, significantly advancing U.S. policy goals. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) The delegation and Karzai discussed Afghanistan's upcoming election and challenges of curbing corruption. Senator McConnell affirmed the Administration's position that the United States seeks a level playing field for candidates competing in the August election. He welcomed news that Karzai would soon sign a decree directing Afghan military and police not to interfere with the electoral process. McConnell also recommended against Afghanistan setting campaign spending limits, arguing that all voices should be heard. When asked about corruption, Karzai called for stronger cooperation between the United States and Afghanistan on fighting corruption and narcotics trafficking, suggesting that the United States has made accusations in the past and had not followed through in assisting Afghan investigations.)

3. (U) Minister of Interior Atmar told the Congressional delegation on behalf of the Afghan people that they are "enormously grateful" for the very generous U.S. contributions of troops and financial resources to help reconstruct the country and fight the insurgency. He said that as Minister of Interior he was very happy with the recently announced results of the U.S. strategic review of our approach on Afghanistan, noting the many challenges he faces in providing security to the Afghan people. With Presidential and provincial elections coming up in August, Minister Atmar was most focused on securing polling sites, protecting candidates, and providing a secure environment for election officials, international observers, and journalists covering the event. The delegation asked probing questions on the fight against the drug trade and corruption within the ranks of the Afghan National Police. Atmar discussed preventing poppy cultivation instead of just focusing on eradication, and noted that more than 400 police officials have been brought up for disciplinary action on corruption charges in his brief tenure.

4. (U) The delegation met with three likely presidential candidates to discuss proposals to create a level playing field for all candidates in this summer's election. Former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah and former Finance Ministers Anwarul al-Haq Ahadi and Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai all called for greater international role in monitoring election fraud and improper use of government resources to benefit Karzai's re-election campaign. Senator McConnell said he supported efforts to create the grounds for a free, fair, and transparent election, beginning with removing restrictions on candidates raising funds for their campaigns. All three candidates agreed, adding that passage of the media law and better monitoring of Afghan security forces' and the Independent Election Commission's neutrality would also level the playing field for all candidates.

5. (U) Following their meeting, the Senators and the potential

candidates held a joint press conference. The story was the lead story in Afghan media the following day, with media quoting Senator McConnell saying that the U.S. supports fair and transparent elections in Afghanistan. McConnell also said that the international community will watch closely the second round of elections in Afghanistan - which are even more important for a new democracy than the first set of elections.

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